

Ethics of the Profession of Public Relations – Does the Public Relations Affects on Journalism in Croatia?

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ABSTRACT

The UK's leading professional body for public relations »Chartered Institute of Public Relations« (CIPR)¹ said that the public relations is about reputation – they are the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Furthermore CIPR says that public relations are discipline whose objectives are safeguarding reputation, establishing understanding and pot pores, and the impact on the thinking and behavior of the public. Although the primary goal of public relations is to preserve and build a reputation, to tell the truth to a customer who has hired experts in this area, it seems that in its own way of development, public relations practitioners have stopped worrying about their reputation and the perception of the discipline within the public they address. All relevant professional bodies for public relations, including the Croatian Association for Public Relation (HUOJ), had set up codes of ethics² and high standards according which the members and practitioners should be evaluated. Among other things stays that practitioner of public relations is required to check the reliability and accuracy of the data prior to their distribution and nurture honesty and accountability to the public interest. It seems that right this instruction of code of ethics has been often violated. In a public speech in Croatia, and therefore in the media, exist manipulation, propaganda, and all the techniques of spin, which practitioners of public relations are skillfully using in the daily transfer of information to the users and target groups. The aim of this paper is to determine what is the perception of the profession to the public. As in today's journalism increasingly present plume of public relations, we wish to comment on the part where journalism ends and begins PR and vice versa. In this paper, we analyze and compare codes of ethics ethics associations for public relations, as well as codes of ethics journalists' associations, in order to answer the question of where the boundaries of public relations and journalism are. Where one ends and the other begins, and the extent to which these two professions touch and affect each other. Is manipulation and spin present in the media, that is the questions that we seek the answer in this paper.

Key words: ethics, public relations, journalism, Croatia

Ethics and Professionalism in Public Relations

There are many reasons why ethics and professionalism should characterize the practice of public relations, but the most important are trust, social responsibility, power and obligation, community building and conflict resolution as well as ethical guardians. A sense of public

relations is to build and maintain relationships, and for that the crucial is trust. It is important for an organization that represents someone ethical and professional.

Confidence largely depends on the integrity of individual practitioners and this is one of the reasons why

¹ The definition of public relations, <http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/about-us/about-pr>, (read on April 23. 2013th)

² The Code of Ethics of the Croatian Association of Public Relations, <http://www.huoj.hr/dokumenti/eticki-kodeks-hr67>, (read on April 23 2013).

public relations are under such scrutiny and the fact that they are so powerful and influential. Practitioners have an obligation to be as professional as possible.³

Ethical questions and dilemmas are inherent in public relations, and ensuring that practitioners operate ethically is fundamental to the professionalism and credibility of the field. Thus, we can conclude that the question of ethics is one of the most common questions that »chased« area of public relations.

As stated by Patricia J. Parson⁴ question of ethics in public relations today became oxymoron because of the growing phenomenon of »spin«, especially in the field of politics and economy.

Telling the 'truth' isn't always enough. It may be a good place to start in a field like public relations but it falls short of fulfilling your ethical responsibilities as a professional in a public communication function. Sometimes you tell the truth and you are still left with a dilemma. Trust is the key element in the development of your employer's or client's relationships

with their publics, but it is equally an important part of your own professional relationships. With trust, much can be accomplished; without trust, your efforts to accomplish anything will feel like an uphill battle.⁵ Which brings us to the question: just how important ethics in public relations?

Ethics in Public Relations

If ethics is the science about morality and moral is understanding of the concepts of good and evil, then the Ethics in Public Relations would be: how to perform and which means to use for good or bad public opinion, while you at the same time that the public does not underestimate, not to offend or disparage. You should have a limit to which you can go.

In the public relations discipline, ethics include values such as honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication. This definition of public relations ethics goes far beyond the olden days of »flacking for space« or spinning some persuasive message, but this view is not shared by everyone.⁶

This term »flacking for space« Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 30) explained in a way that there was a continuous effort of practitioners in dealing with the public to get free media coverage for a client where they used all sorts of tricks to use media or spin the message with persuasion techniques.

Current research, according to Ph.D. Shannon A. Bowen, supports a historical trend of associating public

relations with all things unethical – lying, spin-doctoring, and even espionage. Many critics argue that there can be no ethical public relations because the practice itself is akin to manipulation and propaganda. An unfortunate belief among many journalists, policy makers, and laymen is the belief that the term 'public relations ethics' is an oxymoron: either an unreal possibility, or smoke and mirrors to hide deception.

Patricia J. Parsons (2008, p. 8), in book »Ethics in Public Relations: A Guide to Best Practice« named three possible frameworks that define ethics in public relations:

- First, ethics is not merely what has become accepted practice within the industry. Just because something wrong has been done over and over again through the years does not make it the right thing to do.
- Second, ethics is not merely a question of figuring out what you can get away with. Not getting caught doing something wrong does not make it right. Doing the right thing only to serve your own needs is often considered to be the hallmark of an individual who is functioning at a low level of moral development.
- Finally, ethics is more than simply following the letter of the law. It is a fallacy to assume that everything that is legal is also morally correct; it is equally problematic to presume that everything you consider to be ethical must therefore be legal.

Since there is no unique definition and framework which practitioners should be kept, ethics in public relations today largely relies on the ethical codes that exist within all relevant organizations for public relations and which are mostly referring to moral principles such as honesty, fairness and not harming others.

Are Ethics and Public Relations an Oxymoron?

Business of practitioners of public relations is to bring up the views of the institution or the person that he/she represents in public. Sometimes these positions are not such that would be agreed within wider public awareness, so practitioners themselves shape and adapt their statements to a time and topic they represent. The fact is that the general public is not familiar with the techniques of public relations, therefore, the expert in corporate communications and David Michie, called public relations professionals »invisible persuaders«.⁷

³ Ralph Tench, Liz Yeomans: *Discovering PR*, Print Library, Zagreb, 2009th, p. 310–311

⁴ Parson P.J.: »Ethics in Public Relations: A Guide to Best Practice«, Kogan Page, 2008., p. 4.

⁵ Ibidem p. 23.

⁶ Ph.D. Bowen A.S.: »Ethics and Public Relations«, Syracuse University, 30. Listopada.2007 <http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/ethics-and-public-relations/> (read on August 18, 2013)

⁷ W. Potter, »Does« Ethical PR »have to be an Oxymoron, Richard Edelman?«, 28 November 2010. <http://www.prwatch.org/node/9650> (read on August 10, 2013).

What we said in the summary as an area that will process in this work is a problem of public relations themselves and practitioners who are involved in this profession.

It is evident that in its own way of development, public relations practitioners have stopped worrying about their reputation and the perception of the discipline within the public they address to. That's a shame because PR is not inherently evil or manipulative, says Wendell Potter in his text »Does Ethical PR have to be an Oxymoron, Richard Edelman?« and further he says: »PR has been – and is being – used to good ends. Even the noblest of causes can benefit from the services of a communications expert to clarify facts, disseminate information, and counter unfair arguments. And there are plenty of ethical PR people out there to do this.«⁸

In *Effective Public Relations*, Cutlip & Center wrote that »accountability in a profession means that practitioners must face up to the consequences of their actions.« To hold PR practitioners accountable, the authors suggested the possibility of practitioners being required to obtain a license.⁹

Ethics in the Media

Journalists, by definition, should present facts, and avoid taking personal views and comments on the story. Journalists serve to the public and state the facts and they differ from those who spin the data and are engaged in activities of public relations. But what happens when the public relations become part of journalism and vice versa?

Patricia J Parsons (2008, p. 95) states thought of professor Melvin Sharpe who believes that public relations has a vital check and balance relationship with journalism. »It is our responsibility as a profession to keep the media ethical, transparent, responsible and accurate just as the media... has a public responsibility to inform and question and question and analyze the behaviors of the organizations and governments we advise.«

All what journalists do has ethical implications because everything what a journalist writes or says or refuses to write or say will affect the public. This effect can be larger or smaller. Because the media have a big impact, it is vital that journalists behave professionally and in a responsible manner.

What does it mean for the media to be 'transparent'? If something is transparent, we generally think of being able to 'see through' it. Thus if something is transparent, then what lies beneath it can be seen. In large part, when searching for what lies beneath the media, we follow the

money. This money trail involves issues of ownership, influence and control. It also includes responsible reporting that provides media consumers with enough information to make their own decisions about the legitimacy of the information presented to them, whether it originated with public relations or was ferreted out by journalists themselves.¹⁰

When the media act unreasonable a few things happens, says Baldwin Chiyamwaka in the article »Ethics in the Media: A call for responsible journalism«¹¹:

1. unnecessary harm is done to people;
2. the media loses credibility;
3. it weakens the media's vital role as watch dogs;
4. the well being of democracy suffers

The age of information and technology overdrive journalism in many ways, but based journalism such as ethics, accuracy and fairness are not changed and are now more important than ever.

PR-ization of Media

The truth is that journalists need public relations people every bit as much as PR people need journalists. The character of the relationship between public relations and the media is often at the heart of the potential ethical conflicts.¹²

The resourcefulness of PR practitioners, the need for screening of clients in a positive light while concealing negative (for what clients are paying PR experts and lease advertising space in the media), all contribute to the impact on journalism, manipulation, often not to investigate the information by journalists, or cannot publish a factual information because of budget that agencies, respectively their clients, bring to the media.

However, journalism also has impact on public relations, because topics chosen by journalists under the supervision of editor and media owners certainly influence on creation of events, public relations in a variety of clients and their PR experts. Journalists often cannot understand the topic or verify the accuracy of the information presented and are doomed with factual information.

Kimberly Blessing and Joseph Marren below »Is the PR-ization of Media... BS?«¹³ cite the following example, which describes the state of the profession mentioned in the summary: »A PR pro tries to persuade an editor or producer to give his/her client's side of a story, or to report on a product in a favorable way (unless, of course, the product is manufactured by a competitor). The editor or producer – the so-called »gatekeeper« – has to decide whether to invest time and money in assigning a reporter

⁸ ibidem

⁹ Cutlip and Center: »Effective Public Relations«, Eleventh Edition, izdavač: PH Professional Business, 22. lipnja 2012., str. 121

¹⁰ op.cit note 5, p. 94

¹¹ Chiyamwaka B.: »MEDIA ETHICS: A Call to Responsible Journalism« www.unesco.org/.../MULTIMEDIA/.../Media-ethics, (read on Aug. 12, 2013).

¹² op.cit note 5, p. 90.

¹³ Blessing K. and J. Marren: »Is the PR-ization of Media... BS?« *Media Ethics magazine*, Spring 2013, Vol 24, No.2 (read on 16 August 2013).

to cover the more-or-less manufactured story. The journalist assigned to the story, often full of zeal about reporting the truth, is overworked. Although he or she cares about the job and wants to do the »right thing,« the chances are that he/she is torn between deadlines and expectations of how many stories to produce. So he or she relies on PR, and the PR pro wants to spin a story a certain way. In such a case, true modern era journalism ethics regarding objectivity are compromised.«

Public relations is an important provider of news content, a liaison providing access to information, as well as a definer of the »truth« of that information. As such, it has ethical obligations when dealing with the media. And that is where agreement within the discipline currently stops.¹⁴

The two big issues that emerge are honesty in our communication and access – access to media and access by the media. Both of these potentially problematic issues can affect not only the relationship between public relations and the media, but also between organizations and their communities that use the media as a conduit for information.¹⁵

Spin

A group of journalists and editors extinguished weekly magazine »Forum« took domain www.forum.tm with intent to continue the project which has in a short time of publication received a number of valuable prizes of the Croatian Journalists' Association.

The way they approached online community was portal main page standing in May 2013. year, which contained the following message: »We have decided to accept a job that we know how to do it. Therefore, we have taken over from former publisher portal weekly magazine »Forum«, right on the Press Freedom Day, whose extinguishing we haven't just happily accepted because we think that journalism means more than just PR, spinning information for the ruling / opposition party, the largest corporation or do the job for neighbors from the neighborhood to pay for coffee. It bothers us when they assure you that journalism is dead and no one wants to read well handled topics...«¹⁶

Public is more interested in the appearance of media influence on the public and the impact of public relations on the media.

Public relations, according to their habitus, are destined on communication and mutual understanding, but

PR theorists would hardly write and practitioners would even harder admit that in the application of public relations is not »lying« only on mutual understanding. Trying to satisfy their primary needs are PR sometimes »sidetrack« in some other waters. Does PR then manipulate with the public or with the media?¹⁷

Those who carry out these manipulations today are called »spin doctors«. Although there are a number of definitions for »spin doctors« and descriptions of their task, among others, are giving anonymous guidelines on the »real meaning« of an event, action or statement and design interpretation. Most spin doctors used to be journalists because of that they know how to work with the media. They are aware that journalists are depending on deadlines and are always ready to give information ...¹⁸

In the book »Spin doctors – media manipulators« Knežević (ibid) further states that according to Anthony Davis, the media coined the term »spin doctor« for those persons employed by government to control the content of the news.

The term, according to Davis, is derived from an expression which means to show something in a different, more favorable light. Since the PR compelling and always positive, journalists started to use the term »spin doctors« in general for all who deal with the public.¹⁹

In the article »True Spin«: An Oxymoron or a Lofty Goal? »Author Diane Farsetta²⁰ states how overworked reporters are and how downsized U.S. newsrooms have become. These points were made to impress upon the audience the need to be succinct, timely, accurate and polite in their communications with reporters. It's exactly this situation that PR firms and their clients exploit to place fake news on television and radio, and in newspapers and magazines.

Indeed, the moniker 'spin doctors', which is applied by almost everyone to public relations flacks (there's another one that has rather unpleasant implications about the ethics of those who fill those positions – us), in itself tells a story about a less-than-honourable approach to communicating with the media and consequently with a wider public. The truth is that the name is not so far from the truth. Before you start protesting your own honesty, we need to consider that most of the dishonest things about public relations are much more subtle than the outright lie. They are so insidious that we often overlook them.²¹

¹⁴ Bowen AS: »The Fight for the Soul of Public Relations« Media Ethics Magazine, 31st prosinca 2009th (read on August 20th 2013).

¹⁵ op.cit note 5, p. 90.

¹⁶ »Team of the former Forum launched a new portal Forum.tm »<http://www.poslovni.hr/hrvatska/ekipa-bivseg-foruma-pokrenula-novi-portal-forumtm-239651> (read on 6 September 2013).

¹⁷ Knežević V.: »Spin doktori – medijski manipulatori«, Littera, Banja Luka, 2006. str 18.

¹⁸ Ibidem str. 23.

¹⁹ Ibidem

²⁰ Farsetta D.: »True Spin«: An Oxymoron or a Lofty Goal?, 13. veljače 2006. <http://www.prwatch.org/news/2006/02/4453/true-spin-oxymoron-or-lofty-goal>, (čitano 20. Kolovoza 2013.)

²¹ op.cit.bilješka 5. str 90.

Conclusion

With this work we try to point the continuity of the ethical issues and dilemmas in public relations from their beginnings until today and get up to possible ethical framework approach to the industry. This is a brief description of the definition and development of the public relations profession and the fundamental tenets of recent ethical theories in it. An evaluation of a PR approach to ethics and comparison with more recent approaches to ethics in public relations and derive conclusions. There is a continuity dilemma between two fundamentally different approaches to ethics in this profession from its beginnings to the present day and the need for a unique and clear ethical framework for decision-makers in the industry.

The public expects professional and accurate statement of the facts, but the image of public relations as a profession is often unfairly negative due to unprofessional and unethical conduct of individuals in the field. In practice, the frequent occurrence of the ethics in public relations is considered an oxymoron. Ethics opinion of

experts in public relations ranges from a biblical perspective »all you want people to do to you, do ye even so to them« (Matthew 7:12) to professional loyalty company or organization for which they work for. Due to prevention and sanctioning payments unethical phenomenon it is important to set the rules in the form of codes to which experts in the field of public relations will adjust their behavior.

People are skeptical towards providing information. They are less sure that the information they receive are really there to inform them, and increasingly believe they are released for the purpose of manipulating public opinion. As for the opinions of experts, we can see how they say that ethics is an individual thing and if it appears that unethical behavior that is often the cause of the individual which is important at this point to say something different than the real truth. Lot of reforms and more time will need to make people believe what they are offered for information and to start looking again as information, not as a means to manipulate and easy to reaching a goal.

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ETIKA STRUKE ODNOSA S JAVNOŠĆU – UTJEČU LI ODNOSI S JAVNOŠĆU NA NOVINARSTVO U REPUBLICI HRVATSKOJ?

SAŽETAK

Vodeće britansko profesionalno tijelo za odnose s javnošću »Chartered Institute of Public Relations« (CIPR)²² rekao je da se odnosi s javnošću tiču reputacije – oni su rezultat onoga što radite, što govorite i onoga što drugi govore o vama. Nadalje CIPR kaže kako su odnosi s javnošću disciplina čiji su ciljevi čuvanje ugleda, uspostavljanje razumijevanja i potpore, te utjecaj na mišljenja i ponašanja javnosti. Iako je primarni cilj odnosa s javnošću očuvanje i izgradnja reputacije, doduše klijenta koji je angažirao stručnjaka za to područje, čini se kako su se u svom razvojnog putu sami

²² Definicija odnosa s javnošću, <http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/about-us/about-pr>, 23.travnja 2013.

praktičari odnosa s javnošću prestali brinuti o vlastitoj reputaciji i percepciji same discipline unutar javnosti kojima se obraćaju. Sve relevantne, pa tako i Hrvatska udruga za odnose s javnošću (HUOJ), postavile su svoje etičke kodekse²³ i visoke standarde prema kojima bi se članovi i praktičari trebali vrjednovati. Između ostaloga stoji kako je praktičar za odnose s javnošću dužan provjeriti pouzdanosti i točnosti podataka prije njihove distribucije te njegovati iskrenost i odgovornost prema javnom interesu. Čini se kako se upravo ovaj naputak etičkog kodeksa najčešće krši. U javnom govoru u Republici Hrvatskoj, a samim time i u medijima, prisutno je manipuliranje, propaganda, ali i sve tehnike spina, kojega praktičari odnosa s javnošću vješto koriste pri svakodnevnom prenošenju informacija krajnjim korisnicima i ciljnim skupinama. Cilj je ovoga rada utvrditi kakva je percepcija struke u javnosti. Kako je u današnjem novinarstvu sve više prisutno pero odnosa s javnošću, želja nam je osvrnuti se i na dio gdje prestaje novinarstvo, a počinje PR i obrnuto. U ovome radu analizirat ćemo etičke kodekse udruga za odnose s javnošću kako bismo odgovorili na pitanje gdje je granica odnosa s javnošću i novinarstva. Gdje prestaje jedno, a počinje drugo te u kojoj se mjeri ove dvije profesije dotiču i utječu jedna na drugu. Koliko su u medijima prisutne manipulacije i spinovi, neka su od pitanja na koja tražimo odgovor kroz ovaj rad.

²³ Etički kodeks Hrvatske udruge za odnose s javnošću, <http://www.huoj.hr/dokumenti/eticki-kodeks-hr67>, 23. travnja 2013.